

Family History and Your Health

March is Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month

Colorectal cancer, including cancer of the bowel and rectum, is the second leading cause of cancer related death in the United States. In 2002, nearly 2000 Michigan citizens died from colorectal cancer. It is projected that there will be 56,290 deaths in the U.S. from colorectal cancer in 2005 (American Cancer Society). Because there is a link between family history and colorectal cancer, knowing your family history of the disease is important. Even if you have a family history of colorectal cancer, you may be able to prevent the disease with early screening. For more information on colorectal cancer go to www.cancer.org.

Words to Know

Genes— The basic unit of hereditary information that is the physical basis for transmitting characteristics from one living being to another.

Genetics—The study of the way traits are passed down from one generation to another.

Genomics— The study of all the genes and how they interact with each other and the environment.

Chronic Disease—A disease that lasts a long time or recurs often.



Back to the Basics

Advances in genetics are happening at such a rapid rate that it is hard to keep up with all of them. In spite of all this science and discovery, one of the best tools to assess risk for a disease is still picking up a piece of paper and a pencil and recording your family health history.

What does your family have to do with your health?

- ◆ Family members share genes, behaviors, lifestyles, ethnicity, traditions, cultures, religions, social supports, stress and environment. A person's family health history reflects the outcomes of all these influences. The family health history also holds important clues to current and future health risks.

So where do you start?

- ◆ Start today with your immediate family's health history. The active participation and cooperation of your family is essential to collecting accurate information. Possible places to gather information are: family reunions, holiday celebrations, graduations, weddings, vacations or other family parties. Other places to look for information are baby books, family bibles, military records, old letters, obituaries or death certificates. Sharing medical information may not be very easy for some people, so respect for those who do not wish to share is important. Your family member may have important reasons for not wanting to share that information.



Michigan Department
of Community Health

MDCH

Jennifer M. Granholm, Governor
Janet Olszewski, Director



What do I do with all this information?

If you identify family members with a chronic disease there are three key points to remember:

1. What is their relationship to you?
2. What was their age of onset (when the disease began)? Did the disease appear at a typical age or occur earlier than expected?
3. How many other family members have the same condition?

Take this information to your doctor at your next visit. Your doctor may consider other disease risk factors and recommend screening and lifestyle changes based on the information you give him/her. Remember to keep your family history updated and pass it on to your children. They will thank you for it!

What is Early Onset?

The age at which your relative was diagnosed with disease is an important factor when assessing your risk. If the onset of the disease occurred at a younger age than usual it increases your risk. When preparing your family history it is important to note the current age of your affected family member. The age when a disease was diagnosed and the age of death are also important. The following is a guideline for what may be considered "early onset" when compiling your family history:

Breast Cancer.....before age 50
Colon Cancerbefore age 50
Prostate Cancer.....before age 60
Stroke.....before age 60
Heart Disease.....before age 55 for men
before age 65 for women
Kidney Disease.....before age 50
Dementia.....before age 60
High Blood Pressure.....before age 40
Blood Clots in legs/lungs.....before age 40
Sudden Unexplained Deathbefore age 40



Some other clues to look for in your family history that may increase your risk include:

- ◇ The same disease in more than one close relative
- ◇ Diseases that do not usually affect a certain gender (for example, breast cancer in a male)
- ◇ Certain combinations of diseases running in a family (for example breast and ovarian cancer, or heart disease and diabetes).

Let's Go Surfing!!

www.MIGeneticsConnection.org

www.hhs.gov/familyhistory

[www.nci.nih.gov/cancertopics/
prevention-genetics-causes/
colon-and-rectal](http://www.nci.nih.gov/cancertopics/prevention-genetics-causes/colon-and-rectal)

[http://www.cancerindex.org/
clinks2b.htm](http://www.cancerindex.org/clinks2b.htm)

For more reading ideas on Family History and Genetic Conditions visit:
www.nsgc.org/resources/amazon_books.asp

Family faces are magic mirrors.
 Looking at
 people who belong to us, we see
 the past, present, and future.
 — Gail Lumet Buckley